

The prospects of economic improvement might be lifting spirits among companies and their staff. But experts say regardless, the weight of the recession has underscored the value of an ethos that more employers could afford to embrace: investing in a healthy work environment is just good business.

# Healthy Workplaces

In some way or another, in times of recession, everyone from top executives to front-line staff is affected. And that makes the emotional impacts of recession a concern for all businesses, say leading experts now offering guidance to help companies and their staff better deal with such recessionary fallout and build healthier, more productive enterprises.

"Within organizations, the CEO may not be sleeping well at night because of the impact on the bottom line; employees may be worried about their jobs," says National Quality Institute Healthy Workplace Programs director Stan Murray.

Lorne Zon, CEO of the Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario, notes that stress and mental illness have a tremendous impact on produc-

tivity. "Even before this latest recession began, it was estimated that the direct and indirect costs of stress and mental illness to the Canadian economy was more than \$30 billion each year," he says. "Depending on the type of employer, and type of employment, costs relating to mental health issues were running about four per cent to 12 per cent of payroll costs."

Mental health issues have displaced cardiovascular disease as the fastest growing category of disability costs in Canada. One in five people will experience a mental health event in any given year. "We're certainly seeing a huge increase because of the recession, but it's not something that's going to go away when the recession ends," says Mr. Zon. "Progressive employers understand this, and they have

been putting in programs that deal with mental health as well as physical health."

In difficult economic environments, open communication is a key element of reducing the stresses within an organization that can impact health, he says.

"The more an organization can share, the better. Knowledge is power; power and control go hand in hand. When someone feels more in control, their stress levels go down. Conversely, lack of power and control increases stress; lack of information increases the feeling of powerlessness and increases stress."

As a leading group benefits provider, Great-West Life sees the impact of stress and mental health issues in workplaces across the

country, says Mike Schwartz, senior vice-president, Group Benefits. "On a daily basis, we see the impact on absenteeism, disability rates and productivity."

In response, in 2007, Great-West Life launched the Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace as a public service initiative.

"We're working to prevent or reduce issues related to mental health, in part by increasing awareness. That might involve sponsoring or funding research, or making information and research available in a way that people can use it," says Mr. Schwartz.

"We also look for ways that we can help

turn that knowledge into action, and provide employers and employees with concrete tools and programs they can actually use to make a difference."

A key initiative has been the centre's website at [gwlcentreformentalhealth.com](http://gwlcentreformentalhealth.com). "We provide a variety of resources gleaned from research evidence and promising practices," says Mary Ann Baynton, the centre's program director. "They include ways to create a healthier workplace, steps organizations can take to foster psychological health in the workplace, return-to-work strategies, ideas to help accommodate employees with mental health challenges, management strategies and occupation-specific strategies for emergency responders and high-risk occupations."

The site also includes information about crisis response to address issues that include violence in the workplace, suicide and bereavement, as well as plans and strategies for tackling stigma in the workplace.

"We've worked to discover what employers need. For example, Guarding Minds @ Work helps employers identify the areas in their workplace that may be presenting psychosocial risk to their

employees; then goes even further to provide evidence-based strategies to impact the particular risk factors that are present in that work environment," says Ms. Baynton.

After those strategies are applied, the tool can be used to measure risk again to determine if the intervention had the desired result. "It can help give employers that strategic advantage," she says.

While there has been a wealth of information and programs available, says Mr. Schwartz, the centre's mandate is organizing and targeting high-quality information and tools so that busy supervisors or managers can quickly find the key elements of information they need.

"Many employers are seeking help, and we're providing it to the public at no charge in order to assist those who want to move forward on this issue."

Employers who continue to invest in health and well-being in the workplace even when times are tough send a strong message to employees, says Mr. Murray. "It creates a greater sense of engagement because employees feel cared for, and creates a greater sense of permanence and loyalty. It enhances creativity and motivation to get the work done." ■

## Insight

### Work-life balance remains a key concern

While efficiency and personal sacrifice can be vital to surviving a downturn, companies that work to ensure their employees maintain an overall balance between work and life are ultimately better positioned to thrive.

"People generally try to maintain work-life harmony," says National Quality Institute Healthy Workplace Programs director Stan Murray. "But in times like this, they tend to bend a little bit more toward the work. Ultimately, that has to swing back the other way, and healthy workplaces understand that. Employees also need to know that there will be compensation later on."

Open communication can

go a long way toward ensuring that employees understand that the additional efforts they're making for the organization are recognized and valued, he says.

"They've got to be getting some feedback. And it has to be two-way communication: managers and supervisors need to be aware of changes in work-life balance that affect stress levels or the mental health of employees."

Within the most effective organizations, says Mr. Murray, managers focus on individuals in order to identify issues that require extra attention. "It takes a little bit more effort, but ... goes so far in terms of engaging an employee."

"If you're only looking at

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the bottom line, sometimes it's a little hard to see why something like work-life balance is important," says Kathy Sdao-Jarvie, director, Clinical Standards and Development, Peel Children's Centre. "But no matter what the work is – providing a service or making a product – if you're not happy at work and you can't take care of yourself, it has a negative impact on the products and services you provide."

Conversely, she says if you invest in work-life balance, the return in your employees' service to the organization is exponential, and clients notice the results. "Employees who are happy and satisfied are critical to the ongoing business of the company."

Open communication is an essential element in sustaining any healthy work environment, but especially those in high-stress sectors such as health care.

"We did an employee survey in 2004. Talking with staff about the results opened up new levels of dialogue and communication for us," says Ms. Sdao-Jarvie. "It made us sit back and think – we work together and support each other, but we don't always take time to thank each other. I think our skill in listening changed. We learn from one another."

As an organization that supports children and families, she says, there is a heightened awareness that children and families must

also come first for employees. "It's important to have a workplace that understands and supports that. If you need to be at home, that's where you need to be. Flexibility is another of our values."

She says at Peel managers are encouraged to ensure staff members take all their vacation time, and vacation time that isn't taken is lost.

"When I first came here 10 years ago from an organization that didn't have that policy, I didn't understand the rationale. But after I took that time away, and realized how it replenished me and made me a better employee at work, I came to appreciate it."

We need the time to replenish and connect with other aspects of life." ■

## MENTAL ILLNESS. JUST ANOTHER EXCUSE FOR BAD BEHAVIOUR.

### WOULD YOU SAY THIS ABOUT ANY OTHER ILLNESS?

Shocking? Well we think so too. But according to a recent Canadian Medical Association (CMA) survey of Canadians, 46% of Canadians believe that mental illness offers an excuse for poor behaviour and personal failings. People just don't take mental illness seriously. They assume that people with mental illnesses have a choice, and if they tried hard enough, they could just "snap out of it." But they can't. And like a lot of people with chronic diseases, they can't get better by themselves. Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) is committed to improving the lives of those who are living with mental illness. And with 33 branches in Ontario alone, we provide a place for individuals to reach out for support.

LEARN MORE AT [www.ontario.cmha.ca](http://www.ontario.cmha.ca)

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## It's about ENGAGEMENT

"I love what I do.  
What I do changes people's lives."

At Peel Children's Centre (PCC) we believe competent, motivated and satisfied staff, at all levels and in all positions, are key to success.

According to John Yardley, President of Metrics@Work, "frontline staff ratings at PCC are 10 to 15 percent higher than frontline employees at other organizations in the Employee Feedback Survey database".

"And, in 24 out of 28 employee wellness topics addressed, PCC shattered existing benchmarks."

An accredited charitable organization, PCC has been helping children, youth and their families with mental health issues since 1985.

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Expert advice

# Pandemic preparation: Hope for the best, but plan for the worst

By Russ Gahan  
Director of Operations  
National Quality Institute

An April survey by Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters found that a staggering 87 per cent of Canadian companies had no contingency plan for a pandemic.

A pandemic wave may last about eight weeks and at its peak, organizations can expect up to 50 per cent of their workers to be absent for about two weeks, with lower levels of absenteeism on both sides of the peak. A more serious and more deadly second wave may occur within three to nine months of the first outbreak.

Imagine a workplace where fear and uncertainty about a pandemic outbreak have been replaced with knowledge and an action plan. When half of the workforce is suddenly missing for several weeks, including senior leaders and managers, the remaining staff had better have 100 per cent of the answers.

Clear and accessible policies and an action plan – widely communicated to employees, suppliers and customers – are something every organization can have. So why aren't more of them prepared for what health authori-



ties say is an inevitable threat to business continuity? How can so few appreciate the impact of a crisis on their workplace and what that means to their success or failure? The answers may lie between unfounded optimism and inadequate tools or resources to prepare for it.

A healthy workplace must incorporate a strategy designed to assess the adequacy of plans, policies, procedures, training, resources and relationships that will guide the prevention of, or response to, a crisis or series of crises. Staff training will mitigate fear and bolster confidence by providing a thorough understanding of infectious disease prevention and protection during an outbreak.

A well-communicated plan with provisions to protect and take care of staff, to handle their work in their

absence, and to speed their recovery and return to work will contribute to a culture of support and increased employee engagement. This is never more important than during a pandemic. An organization that is seen to be proactively preparing a strategy also enjoys the increased esteem and confidence of its suppliers and clients.

In its August 29, 2009, briefing notes, the World Health Organization indicated that evidence from multiple outbreak sites demonstrated that the H1N1 pandemic virus has rapidly established itself and is now the dominant influenza strain in most parts of the world. It goes on to state that countries in the northern hemisphere should prepare for a second wave of pandemic spread. Quoting from the notes, "Larger numbers of severely ill patients requiring intensive care are likely to be the most urgent burden on health services, creating pressures that could overwhelm intensive care units and possibly disrupt the provision of care for other diseases." Not only should Canadians be

concerned about severe burdens on health care services, but business leaders must be concerned about severe impacts to their business operations.

Many government agencies and associations have created checklists for pandemic preparedness. "You should do this... you will need these... you have to do that..." but the National Quality Institute (NQI), Canada's authority on

organizational excellence and Healthy Workplace®, has found over the years that a well-organized framework, tools for implementation and direct coaching yield the most effective results in getting the job done. NQI recommends a tool that helps organizations meet the requirements of one of its criteria for Healthy Workplace®, leading an organization through the emergency planning process

step by step. The result is an operational plan, communication memos, infection prevention and control policies, human resource policies, a methodology to determine personal protective equipment requirements for staff and their families, and finally an exercise to test the plan. For more pandemic readiness information, call NQI at 1-800-263-9648 and contact Russ Gahan ext 249. ■



## Get involved in Healthy Workplace Month

October 5 - November 1, 2009



Each year, the National Quality Institute celebrates Healthy Workplace Month, encouraging managers to consider ways to make their workplaces better.

Presented by Great-West Life, this year's Healthy Workplace Month theme is "Healthy Mind, Healthy Body, Healthy Work...Feeling Great about Life!"

The four weekly themes focus on feeling great about life – at work, with family and friends, at play, and giving back to community.

Each week during Canada's Healthy Workplace Month, NQI invites organizations to participate in an activity or two, or more, that will improve the health of their mind, body and workplace.

Participants can choose from NQI's list of more than 100 suggested activities, or create their own, and earn points, recognition and a chance to win one of 40 awards.

Registration is free and workplaces of any size or sector are welcome to participate. ParticipACTION has generously donated 20,000 pedometers that will be given away to organizations as they register on a first-come, first-served basis, while supplies last.

To register or learn more, visit [www.healthyworkplacemonth.ca](http://www.healthyworkplacemonth.ca)

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## Getting down to healthier business



**Across Canada, employers are looking for ways to manage complex health issues in the workplace. We're helping to find real solutions.**

### Working for our customers

From prevention to return to work, we help our customers focus on wellness and ability. With our products, services, tools and expertise we can help employers identify risk factors, sort through their options and take action to support healthier, more productive workplaces.

### Working for all Canadians

Beyond innovative solutions for our clients, we're making available for all Canadian employers valuable tools and resources through the Great-West Life Centre for Mental Health in the Workplace, like:

**Guarding Minds @ Work™** – Practical, user-friendly tools and resources to help employers identify organizational issues that may impact employee mental health, identify action steps and measure progress and outcomes.

**Working Through It™** – A series of web-based videos offering the perspectives of 10 individuals who share how they worked through depression or anxiety-related disorders and successfully coped at work, off work and returning to work.

These and other resources are available free through the Centre website at [www.gwlcetreformentalhealth.com](http://www.gwlcetreformentalhealth.com)

**We're pleased to support the health of the communities in which we live and work, and to be the title sponsor of NQI's Healthy Workplace Month.**

